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RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000887

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KDEM VE

SUBJECT: NEW MEASURES PROPOSED TO ELIMINATE INDEPENDENT MEDIA

REF: A. CARACAS 847

1B. CARACAS 766 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FFERNANDEZ, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: Pressure and attacks against the independent media have continued during the first-half of July. Government Minister Diosdado Cabello told lawmakers that any draft legislation on media social responsibility should include provisions to limit radio networks, restrict joint programming, and place cable networks under controls similar to free-to-air broadcasters. In response to a series of controversial advertisements against proposed changes to property law, the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) attacked the media for carrying advertising against the draft legislation. Harassment against Globovision continued, with the GBRV opening a fifth case against the network related to the controversial advertisements. Supporters of the GBRV continue to intimidate journalists who are critical of the GBRV and government officials. In opposition controlled Carabobo, militant groups backed by a pro-Chavez Mayor physically attacked a local opposition oriented newspaper on two separate occasions. As summer begins to heat up in Venezuela, the GBRV clearly is continuing to pressure the media and attempting to limit any criticism of Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. End Summary.

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GOVT MINISTER TELLS LAWMAKERS TO REGULATE RADIO/CABLE  
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12. (C) In a move designed to cripple opposition oriented media, Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) Minister of Public Works and Housing, Diosdado Cabello, addressed the National Assembly (AN) on July 9 insisting that pro-Chavez lawmakers limit radio networks to a maximum of three stations under the proposed "Law on Social Responsibility for Radio and Television." If Cabello's proposal is adopted, radio networks would further be atomized by limiting their ability to conduct joint programs to only 30 minutes a day. Cabello emphasized, "Radio transmissions are one of the few areas where the revolution has not yet been felt." Cabello added, "We are going to continue moving forward with this; we will democratize the spectrum and end radio's latifundo." Cabello further used the occasion to accuse the Venezuelan Radio Association (CVIR) of running "clandestine broadcasts" and informed lawmakers he is no longer willing to hold dialogue with the union.

13. (C) Further fueling worry among supporters of independent media, (the vast majority of which receive their

news from private international or local cable providers), Cabello instructed lawmakers to include in any draft legislation a provision requiring cable TV stations with less than 70% foreign content be subject to the same Government regulations as free-to-air broadcasters. Currently, cable stations are able to continue broadcasting in the country (and are immune from CONATEL regulations) operating as "international broadcasters."

¶4. (C) In a calculated move designed to prevent free-to-air television station Globovision from moving to cable (as the now shuttered Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) did following its closure in 2007), Cabello told lawmakers that cable TV stations should be considered "national producers" and subject to GBRV regulation. Cabello declared, "If a station has Venezuelan authors, Venezuelan capital, transmission rights, Venezuelan directors, Venezuelan assets, Venezuelan Commercials, Venezuelan locations in their programs, Venezuelan technicians or broadcasts Venezuelan culture, it should comply with Venezuelan regulations."

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PRESSURE ON GLOBOVISION CONTINUES  
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¶5. (C) Following a series of controversial advertisements sponsored by the conservative think-tank Cedice against a GBRV backed proposal to change property legislation (Septel), on July 3 Cabello ordered the organization to stop airing the televised spots. The highly successful ads included depiction of pregnant women accompanied by the slogan "the social property law takes away what's yours." Cabello warned that television and radio stations would face sanctions if they did not follow his order and immediately cancel the ads.

On the same day, however, Conatel initiated a fifth

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investigation against Globovision, together with similar charges against Venevision, Meridano TV, Televen, and two radio stations for running the ads. The regulatory agency accused the stations of causing "anxiety and fear in the population and undermining the security of the nation." Media reported on July 7 that additional charges were also being considered for violations of the "Organic Law on the Rights of Women to Live a Life Free of Violence."

¶6. (C) Following on the heels of the SENIAT tax agency's June 16 announcement that the network owed 9 million BsF (USD 4.2 million at the official exchange rate) for failing to pay taxes on programming aired for free in 2002 and 2003 (REF B), and the subsequent collection of private donations to pay the fine from over 400,000 citizens, on July 10 Globovision executives paid GRBV tax authorities the arbitrarily imposed debt.

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IF ALL ELSE FAILS, TRY THUGGERY  
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¶7. (C) Supporters of the GBRV continue to intimidate journalists who are critical of the GBRV and government officials. In opposition controlled Carabobo, militant groups attacked a local opposition oriented newspaper "El Carabobeno" on two separate occasions. On June 30, in the first attack, vandals spray painted the words "information criminals" and "palangrista (paid informant)" on the exterior windows and walls of the newspaper's headquarters. In a more serious attack on July 1, pro-Chavez (PSUV) Mayor Edgardo Parra and his supporters physically attacked the same building aboard motorcycles, throwing stones, ransacking an exterior cafe, briefly penetrating the interior lobby area, and intimidating employees causing serious panic. The attackers, donning red shirts and megaphones shouted phrases such as "Carabobeno fascists," "Tell the truth," and "Honduras hang on, the people will rise."

¶8. (C) Immediately following the attack, opposition Carabobo Governor Salas Feo phoned PolOff to cancel his planned attendance at Embassy's annual Fourth of July reception. In a July 2 interview with the media, PSUV Valencia Mayor Parra denied his involvement in the attacks and made counter claims that there was no aggression against the paper. According to his version of events, the only demonstrations that occurred were against the coup in Honduras and minor incidents of graffiti at the paper's headquarters.

¶9. (C) Comment: This is the first time Post has seen the GBRV twist a law designed to protect women and adolescents from exploitation and discrimination into a tool for pressuring, silencing and censoring the opposition. The Government is clearly trying to limit any criticism of its regime by pressuring any and all media that are critical of President Chavez or his self-styled Bolivarian Revolution. Using all the tools at his disposal -- redrafting legislation, CONATEL regulations, harassment by tax authorities, and good old fashioned thuggery -- Chavez continues to show he is not at all hesitant to bully his critics in the media. End Comment.

CAULFIELD